



PENNSYLVANIA HEALTHCARE PROFILES

Know Your Numbers

Penn State Health's top cardiologists help patients recognize and reduce their risk for heart disease.



From coronary artery disease to heart attack, heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, impacting millions every year. But knowing your numbers and following simple, heart-healthy habits can reduce your risk.

"The most important numbers are blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and body mass index (BMI). These numbers represent the primary risk factors for heart disease," says Priya Rajagopalan, M.D., an interventional cardiologist at Penn State Health. "Blood sugar is the first number doctors monitor."

Over time, high blood sugar can damage blood vessels and nerves throughout the heart,



Priya Rajagopalan, M.D.

and people with diabetes are prone to other health problems that raise the risk of heart disease. Impacting roughly one in 10 Americans, diabetes can be life-threatening but is easily managed for most.

"Regularly checking your blood sugar can ensure it

remains within a healthy range," says Dr. Rajagopalan. She recommends nondiabetic individuals keep fasting blood sugar below 100 by eating well and exercising regularly.

"That's especially important for women who have had gestational diabetes, which can lead to chronic diabetes down the line," she notes.

Combined with preeclampsia, a high blood pressure disorder that occurs during pregnancy, these conditions put women at increased risk for heart disease later in life.

"High blood pressure damages arteries and increases the heart's workload, causing heart attacks—or worse—heart failure," Dr. Rajagopalan continues. Known as the "silent killer," nearly half of American adults

have high blood pressure, and most don't have any symptoms.

High blood pressure doesn't automatically indicate heart disease, but maintaining a healthy range helps prevent cardiovascular disease, says Dr. Rajagopalan, who recommends keeping blood pressure below 130 over 80. Many factors contribute to high blood pressure. But it can be controlled by lowering salt intake, limiting alcohol, and eating healthy—which may also improve cholesterol levels.

"Cholesterol has many subcomponents—good cholesterol, bad cholesterol, triglycerides, and total cholesterol. Different types of cholesterol earn their labels by how they impact the body," Dr. Rajagopalan explains. "High-density lipoprotein cholesterol, or 'good' cholesterol, is cardioprotective. The higher the number, the better it is for your heart health." But too much low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, or "bad" cholesterol, can block the arteries, leading to heart disease or stroke.

"One easy number to remember is 200," says Dr. Rajagopalan. "Keeping total cholesterol under 200 keeps your risk in check."

The final critical number is BMI, which measures the relationship between weight and height. While ideal body weight varies by gender, age, and height, a higher BMI is associated with higher risk for heart disease.

"Maintaining a body mass index below 25 is essential to good heart health," Dr. Rajagopalan says. She recommends patients monitor all their numbers at least once a year, but annual checks aren't enough when elevated risk factors or symptoms present.

That's where Penn State Health comes into the picture. "We're committed to providing world-class patient care and treatment," says Dr. Rajagopalan.